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From ideological literary criticism to the educational status of literature in the 1950s

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Abstract

Since it is an important element of the literary text's existence as aesthetic unit, the language of the literary work provides a significant number of arguments for establishing the latter's degree of artistry. Maiorescu's principle of placing aesthetics before ethics, which characterizes Romanian education before 1948, stops working after this date, when literature, both in terms of its creation and of its critical interpretation, is brought under political control and placed in the propagandistic service of the single party. Our paper aims to analyze this change in perspective and the contextual causes that generated it.

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Introduction

The attention paid, in the first communist decade, by the curricular documents and the school textbooks to the matters concerning the language of the literary work is of a varied degree of emphasis, its content changing quickly according to the political and ideological modifications occurring in the age.

The determinations acting on this important aspect of the artistic text come from areas seemingly distant from the field of literature's educational existence. However, we believe that, as surprising as it may sound today, identifying and relating them is absolutely necessary to the understanding of the phenomenon under discussion.

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Literary criticism

Firstly, it is rather evident, especially after 1948, that literature enters, for at least a decade, under political control, and the role reserved for it is almost exclusively that of propaganda instrument mainly directed at the “large masses of the population.” We believe that the alphabetization campaign, which is correct and beneficial at its core, is also motivated, from this perspective, by such a reason: to secure or to facilitate the wide access to texts that, especially under the more attractive and emotionally stirring form of literature, could transmit more efficiently the desired ideological message. Or, so that it could be received without difficulty, the language employed in those texts needed to be free of the great decoding challenges which are necessarily entailed by great artistry.

This explains, on the one hand, the promotion and elevation to the status of literary work of texts that are, often, on the minimum acceptable level to justify such a classification. Whether due to the absence of any shade of talent, or because they have it, but they censor their true artistic vocation so as to take advantage of the opportunities of the moment, most of the writers at the time go beyond themselves to satisfy these imperative, after all, demands, to create for the people, for their understanding, in the living and simple language of the popular masses.

On the other hand, even the involuntary slips into more “pretentious” or more specifically expressive areas of language constitute, in the view of the political power and of its cultural commissioners, serious departures from ideology, open to the most severe punitive measures.

The accusation of “cosmopolitanism” – paired by that of allegiance to the “decadent” theories on art, indebted to the bourgeois ideology of the West and springing from a hostile attitude towards the interests of the people – is promptly formulated any time the political leaders of culture notice such “unprincipled” and “antiparty” manifestations. There are numerous examples in the press of the day, since the latter was under strict and vigilant political control, of such punitive reactions, but some are particularly significant due to their impact and their discouraging effect. Among them, there is an article by Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu (1949), where the critic admonishes the lack of talent characterising some short-story writers whose work dealt, without exception, with aspects of the class struggle in Romanian villages and factories. In effect, the critic does nothing else than to point out the lack, sometimes blatant, of artistry characterizing these texts.

Read today, with no knowledge of the political context, the lines of this demonstration seem elementary statements, which would need no particular defence or careful theoretical argumentation.

Although he ably constructs his demonstration, placing it in the essential ideological frame of the moment, in the context of a police-type ideological vigilance, the gesture does not go unnoticed and the forces rapidly engaged in writing an indicting reply are impressive. The case is discussed in a meeting of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers’ Party, where the “deviations” of Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu are severely criticized and are met with most disquieting warnings. On this note, the party’s newspaper, *Scântea* (“Să luptăm”/“Let’s fight”, 1949), formulates, shortly after, a true indictment, playing the tune of indignation at the critic’s suggestion that only 5% of the young writers “should remain in the field of literature.”: “Oricât de revoltătoare s-ar părea această propunere plină de dispreț ciocoiesc pentru noile condeie care pătrund în literatura noastră, ea apare în adevărata ei lumină abia atunci când analizăm mai de aproape care sunt lucrările criticate și cine sunt cei pe care autorul îi socotește nedemni de a scrie. EXEMPLELE NEGATIVE DATE ÎN ARTICOL SUNT LUATE APROAPE EXCLUSIV DIN LUCRĂRILE CARE SE OCUPĂ DE LUPȚA CLASEI MUNCITOARE ȘI A ȚĂRĂNIMII MUNCITOARE pentru construirea socialismului. Articolul este scris cu un vădit accent de ironie, el fiind în întregime sa o persiflare a temei noi în literatura noastră. Și asta se cheamă după tov. O. Crohmălniceanu «luptă pentru calitate»! Ce altceva se ascunde sub această etichetă ipocrită decât un profund dispreț nu numai pentru literatura nouă, nu numai pentru tema nouă, dar pentru însăși viața și lupta poporului muncitor – pentru ceea ce frământă masele, pentru socialism, pentru fericirea patriei? Este lesne de recunoscut în această judecată buruiana otrăvită a cosmopolitismului, arma ideologiei imperialiste, vechea poziție de desconsiderare a maselor, de neîncredere în forța lor creatoare, săpată în conștiința intelectualilor noștri de burghezia trădătoare de patrie. Căci cosmopolitismul nu înseamnă numai citarea din scriitorii și criticii apusului decadent, COSMOPOLITISMUL SE MANIFESTĂ PRIN LIPSA DE DRAGOSTE PENTRU REALIZĂRILE PATRIEI, PENTRU SOCIALISM, PRIN DISPREȚ PENTRU CLASA MUNCITOARE. Iar argumentul «calității» este și a fost întotdeauna argumentul cosmopolitilor fără patrie, masca sub care acești «esteți» au încercat să lovească în ceea ce abia se naște, pentru a apăra ceea ce și-a trăit traiul și moare. [...] o astfel de critică este o formă de luptă dușmană împotriva noii literaturi, o formă de pătrundere a ideologiei dușmane care NU LOVEȘTE NUMAI ÎN OPERA LITERARĂ DAR TINDE SĂ MINEZE DRAGOSTEA FAȚĂ DE PATRIA

SOCIALISTĂ ÎN DEVENIRE. A lovi în temele literaturii noi, în acele lucrări al căror scop e de a mobiliza masele, de a insufla un nou avânt în lupta pentru socialism, înseamnă nu numai a disprețui literatura nouă, DAR A DISPREȚUI ÎNSEȘI MASELE, ÎNSĂȘI CONSTRUIREA SOCIALISMULUI.” [As revolting as this proposal, filled with vulgarian contempt for the new pens writing their way into Romanian literature, might seem, it reveals its true face only when we look more closely at the selection of works to be criticized and of authors deemed unworthy of writing. THE NEGATIVE EXAMPLES GIVEN IN THE ARTICLE COME ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY FROM THE WORKS DEALING WITH THE STRUGGLE OF THE WORKING CLASS AND PEASANTRY to build socialism. The article is written in an obvious ironic vein, the whole of it being a mockery of the new theme in our literature. And this, according to comrade O. Crohmălniceanu, is ‘fighting for quality’! What else lies hidden under this hypocritical label than a profound contempt, not only for the new literature, not only for the new theme, but also for the life and struggle of the working people – for what troubles the masses, for socialism, for the happiness of the country? It is easy to detect in this evaluation, the poisonous weed of cosmopolitanism, the weapon of imperialistic ideology, the old stand of disregarding the masses, of doubting their creative force, branded in the consciousness of our intellectuals by the traitorous bourgeoisie. For cosmopolitanism means not only quoting from the writers and critics of the decadent West, COSMOPOLITISM MANIFESTS ITSELF IN THE LACK OF LOVE FOR THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE COUNTRY, FOR SOCIALISM, IN THE CONTEMPT FOR THE WORKING CLASS. And the argument of “quality” is and always was the argument of the cosmopolites without a country, a mask under which these “aesthetes” have tried to strike at what is newly emerging, so as to defend what lived its days and is dying. [...] such criticism is a form of enemy attack against the new literature, a type of breach from the enemy ideology which NOT ONLY STRIKES AT THE LITERARY WORK, BUT AIMS TO UNDERMINE THE LOVE FOR THE SOCIALIST COUNTRY IN THE MAKING. To strike at the themes of the new literature, at those works whose purpose is to mobilize the masses, to breath new life into the fight for socialism, is not only to despise the new literature, BUT ALSO TO DESPISE THE MASSES THEMSELVES, THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIALISM.]

From the same article, we also extract the statements that reflect the official ideological stand on the aesthetic component of the literary text: “Dar ce se înțelege prin calitate în opera literară? Este calitatea o chestiune de formă? Pentru formalistii burghezi, desigur, este o chestiune de formă. Este o chestiune de potriveală de cuvinte. Că sub aceasta potriveală mai mult sau mai puțin meșteșugită de cuvinte se ascund idei dușmănoase clasei muncitoare, umanității și progresului, sau nu, asta nu mai are importanță. Să fie... «frumos» și gata. Dar oare acesta este frumosul? În forme constă frumosul?” [But what is understood by quality in the literary work? Is quality a matter of form? For the bourgeois formalists, it is, naturally, a matter of form. It is a matter of word arrangement. Never mind whether under this arrangement lie hidden ideas hostile to the working class, humanity and progress. Let it be ‘beautiful’... and nothing else. But is this truly what beauty means? Does beauty reside in form?] The same article implies that not even the proper awareness of the Romanian language is necessary, if the message is appropriate from a political point of view: “Despre ce scriu aceste condeie tinere? Despre Patria noastră, despre munca creatoare, despre socialism, despre viață, despre fericire. Mulți scriu încă stângaci, alții cu greșeli de gramatică, alții naiv. Dar în fiecare din aceste scrieri clocotește entuziasmul pentru viața nouă. Ele reprezintă mlădițele literare ale vieții noi.” [What is it that these young pens write about? About our country, about the work of creation, about socialism, about life, about happiness. A lot of them are still clumsy in their writing, others naive, others make grammar mistakes. But in each of these writings bubbles the enthusiasm for the new life. They represent the literary sprouts of the new life.]

It is easily understood that, from the Stalinist-Zhdanovist perspective on literature, the plea for artistry is only a “screen of aesthetic exigency,” (Novicov, 1949) hiding hostile attitudes towards the new literature and, in an automatic entailment at the time, against the people, the party and the cause of building socialism.

Since aesthetic criticism is abolished and the fundamental texts of its representatives – from Titu Maiorescu to the third generation after him – are taken off circulation and classified as reactionary, it is self understood that what is required from literature at this time, in terms of creation, as well as of interpretation/reception, is to exclusively exercise its propagandistic function. Literary language, artistic construction and, in general, the coordinates for expressing literary talent become indifferent or punishable in case they deviate from the rule of accessibility.

Between 1949 and 1950 this exigency is imperative and it is reflected not only by official documents and “theoretical” articles that peddle it in all cultural magazines, but also by the functions and missions officially undertaken by the cultural institutions of the age. In the establishment meeting of the Writers’ Union, on 25 March

1949, the “assigned tasks” in the *Salute of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers’ Party addressed to the R.P.R. Writers’ Conference* and signed by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (“Uniunea Scriitorilor din RPR va trebui să fie un centru al luptei împotriva servilismului cosmopolit, în fața culturii capitaliste intrate în putrefacție, împotriva imitației slugarnice a diferitelor curente ale literaturii burgheze, care au drept scop izolarea scriitorilor de realitate și săparea prăpastiei între creator și popor.” [The R.P.R. Writers’ Union will have to be a centre for the fight against cosmopolite servility to the putrescent capitalist culture, against the slavish imitation of the various trends of bourgeois literature, which aim to isolate writers from reality and dig an abyss between creator and the people.], *Scânteia*, 26 March 1949) are immediately materialized in a programme text entitled *The Writers’ Association on a new path* and in *The New Statute of the R.P.R. Writers’ Association*.

Although, apparently, there is no direct connection between the precepts of the new literary criticism and the way in which literature is reflected in the educational system, the consequences of these dramatic abdications from the principle of artistic specificity are immediately registered by the educational field. Specialized publications take over, almost *ad literam*, the accusatory text from *Scânteia*. Only three days after the publication of the article “Să luptăm pentru o critică de artă principială, pătrunsă de spirit de partid / Let’s fight for a principled art criticism, impregnated by party spirit,” *Gazeta învățământului/ The Education Gazette* publishes a text with a similar title, which also includes a reference to the essential role played by criticism in creating the interpretive discourse, the act of didactically concretizing literature: “Critica de artă principială, ajutor al învățământului realist-științific/ Principled art criticism, an aid of scientific-realist education”. The scientific-realist status of literature in the educational system can only result from the same view, which entails nullifying the aesthetic principle and reducing the literary work to the simple role of channel for the Leninist-Stalinist ideology: “Principală slăbiciune constată la critica noastră este lipsa de principialitate partinică, tendința de a judeca o operă de artă după criterii formaliste [...] neținând seama de conținutul ei revoluționar. [...] Pentru a atrage, a educa masele, criticii noștri ar trebui, de asemenea să scrie recenzii limpezi și cuprinzătoare, care să informeze, într-o limbă ușor de înțeles, asupra conținutului și valorii unei cărți – nu să se mărginească la lucrări de erudiție pentru specialiști.” [The main weakness of our criticism is the lack of party principles, the tendency to judge a literary work according to formalist principles [...] without taking into account its revolutionary content. [...] To attract, to educate the masses, our critics should also write clear and comprehensive reviews to inform, in a language easily understood, about the content and the value of a book – they shouldn’t only limit themselves to writing erudite works for specialists.] Clearly, in the opinion of this article’s author, “to attract, to educate the masses,” it is not only the critical discourse that should be elaborated “in a language easily understood,” but also the texts submitted for interpretation.

Linguistics

The linguistic theories advanced during this period also influence, to a similar degree, the perspective on the study of the literary work. It is interesting to notice that, in this field, in a matter of only two years, the official ideological option changes radically. Until 1950, Romanian linguistics follows the theories of Nikolai Iakovlevici Marr, considered the founder of Marxist linguistics and praised as such by the Moscow regime, as well as the linguistic circles of the satellite countries. In essence, his theory emphasizes the class character of language and its dependence on the social and political system, predicting that, in the future, with the final victory of communism, only one language will be spoken.

After 1950, Stalin intervenes in this field with a study entitled “Marxismul și problemele lingvisticii/ Marxism and the problems of linguistics,” contradicting Marr’s theory and prompting fundamental shifts in perspective in the aesthetic world of linguistics. From this moment on, the ideas of the leader in Moscow become, for the Romanian linguists as well, “brilliant,” and Marr’s linguistic perspective debatable and unacceptable.

It should be mentioned that none of these theories is fundamentally mistaken; the gravity lies in the ideological excess characterizing both of them, as well as the fields on which they reflect.

Consequences on the educational status of literature

The curricular documents elaborated and made operational in this age prove the fact that, due to the ideological nature of literary criticism and linguistics, the perspective on the study of literature and its materialization in the

didactic act is gravely damaged, the understanding of the very purpose for the existence of the artistic act being affected.

The first document that provides a statute for the communist study of literature in Romanian schools is “Tezele provizorii de istoria literaturii române/ Provisional theses on Romanian literary history” published by the Ministry of Public Education in several brochures in 1950. In the absence of textbooks, which will be printed in the sixth decade, they provide a real image of the demands on this subject in secondary school. Even a quick look at this document allows for several brief observations. We extract some of them in the wording of one of the time’s literary ideologists, in a first analysis dedicated to the “Theses...” (Campus, 1950).

- “Spre deosebire de vechile istorii literare, care falsificau adevărul istoric pentru a servi interesele reacționare ale burghezo-moșierimii, învâluindu-le în cețuri metafizico-idealiste, tezele de față restabilesc adevărul, folosind metoda marxist-leninistă” [In contrast with the old literary histories that falsified the historic truth, so as to serve the reactionary interests of the bourgeois landowner class, wrapping them in a metaphysical-idealistic fog, the current theses restore the truth using the Marxist-Leninist method.] (Campus, 1950).
- with the exception of the classic writers, the selection of authors and newly introduced texts is made almost exclusively according to the criterion of “class struggle”; a great part of the minor authors from *Contemporanul* owe their presence in the syllabus to this criterion (C. Mille, Sofia Nădejde, St. Basarabeanu, Paul Bujor, Ion Păun-Pincio, Nicole Beldiceanu, Th. Neculuță, A. Toma etc.).
- with very few exceptions (the reference, in passing and mainly in the presentation of the old and pre-modern period, to the contribution of a chronicle writer to the development of the Romanian language) and although there are very brief notes on “Composition and language” at the end of some of the authors’ presentations, the references to the artistic language of the work are almost non-existent; the study focuses almost exclusively on the content of ideas, associated naturally or strainedly, with the expected message in the reception perspective of the age’s ideology: the hatred against exploiters, the irreconcilable conflict between classes, the criticism addressed to bourgeois politics, the satire of the western models, of the artistic preciousness etc. The references, few as they are, to the language of the literary work mainly focus on this aspect and they emphasize, almost stereotypically, the influences of the living language, of the people on the writers. Even so, however, in the quoted analysis, Eugen Campus believes that the inclusion of the language matters among the elements contributing to the artistic value of the work is an “ideological confusion.”
- the general and the stylistic assessments of the texts and authors selected for the secondary school classes originate in the understanding of literature as an exclusively superstructural fact: “Dezvoltarea literaturii este nemijlocit legată de dezvoltarea societății omenești. [...] Și, cum istoria omenirii este istoria luptei de clasă, fără îndoială ca și literatura (orală sau scrisă) ne înfățișează imaginea acestui lucru. [...] Dar în societatea împărțită în clase antagonice nu poate fi vorba de existența unei literaturi unitare; în cadrul aceleiași culturi naționale apar două culturi, două literaturi: una care reprezintă și apără interesele clasei reacționare, dușmane mersului înainte al societății, cealaltă care reprezintă și apără interesele clasei revoluționare, progresiste [...]” [The development of literature is directly connected to the development of human society. [...] And, since the history of mankind is the history of class struggle, undoubtedly literature (oral or written) reflects this fact. [...] However, in a society divided into antagonistic classes, there cannot be a unified literature; two cultures, two literatures appear within the same national culture: one representing and defending the interests of the reactionary class, hostile to the progress of society, the other representing and defending the interests of the revolutionary, progressive class.] (MÎP, 1950). The aesthetic changes occurring in the work of some of the discussed authors are deemed positive or negative in terms of their optional transfer from one to the other of the two categories of interests.

In 1952, a syllabus of Romanian literature is published (MÎP, 1952), the first one bearing this title specific to the educational field. A note from the editor mentions that the syllabus “a fost întocmită de Institutul de Istorie Literară și Folclor al Academiei R.P.R. în colaborare cu Institutul de Științe Pedagogice și Uniunea Scriitorilor din R.P.R.” [was drafted by the Institute of Literary History and Folklore of the R.P.R. Academy in collaboration with the Institute of Pedagogical Sciences and the R.P.R. Writers’ Union.]

In terms of the theme under scrutiny, the question of the literary work’s language registers a modification, at least from a quantitative point of view. After becoming bases of linguistic thought, Stalin’s “brilliant” ideas allow a greater extension in the treatment of the literary text’s expressive elements. Two pages and a half from the chapter

on “Îndrumări metodice pentru lecțiile de istoria literaturii/ Methodical guidelines for the lessons of literary history” are reserved for recommendations concerning the “Studierea limbii operei literare/ The study of the literary work.” Two observations are necessary at this point as well. Firstly, the text includes no less than four rather ample quotations from “Marxismul și problemele lingvisticii/ Marxism and the problems of linguistics” (I.V. Stalin). Secondly, the clarification of certain issues concerning language is meant only “să ajute pe elevi la aprofundarea sensului ideologic al operei.” [to help the pupils with a deeper understanding of the ideological meaning of the work.]

Moreover, for almost two decades longer, the existence of literature in the didactic field will reside under the primacy of the ideological principle over the aesthetic, the analysis of the expressive elements being limited to an inventory of “figures of speech” or, even worse, simply being an enumeration of such figures.

The traces of this methodology are deep and persistent, since, even today, at the end of some literary analyses, one can still read sentences such as this: “Scriitorul folosește foarte frumoase epitete, comparații, metafore, personificări etc.” [The writer uses very beautiful epithets, similes, metaphors, personifications, etc.]

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